

**Alan Nadel. *Demographic Angst: Cultural Narratives and American Films of the 1950s*. Rutgers UP, 2017. xiii + 215 pp. (review)**

In his long career, Alan Nadel has moved from scholarship on authors such as Ralph Ellison, J. D. Salinger, and August Wilson to work in American and cultural studies as well as film and media studies. His influential 1995 book, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age*, explores issues related to America and the Cold War in film and fiction. Nadel combines macro sociology and history with a patina of New Criticism, regarding the text as a closed system for creating meaning that is determined by the critic.

*Demographic Angst*, Nadel's return to 1950s films, reads like a long-deferred sequel to *Containment Culture*. The new book focuses on the tension between majoritarian culture and the widespread demographic changes felt in America after World War II. Nadel digs into movies made in a postwar Hollywood harried by falling audience numbers due to television, the growth of suburbs, and families busy raising children. The film industry was also racked by the House Un-American Activities Committee-incited blacklist of suspected subversives in the studios and the Supreme Court-ordered breakup of the vertically integrated studio system.

The author tells us at both the beginning and the end of *Demographic Angst* that he is examining "canonical" films (xii). This is a contested concept, given that, say, a film historian might have a different 1950s canon than would an auteurist, a feminist, or a queer theorist. Moreover, he includes forgotten films that are in nobody's canon, such as *You Gotta Stay Happy* (1948), *Susan Slept Here* (1954), *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956), and *Sayonara* (1957). It would have been better to state his purpose as studying films that typify what audiences saw during the era. The book never settles between typical films and any particular canon. This is one of the issues that makes it finally so uneven.

---

This is the author's manuscript of the work published in final form as:

Bingham, D. (2019). Demographic Angst: Cultural Narratives and American Films of the 1950s by Alan Nadel (review). *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 65(3), 539–541. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2019.0033>

Nadel starts out with what appears to be a feminist approach. He regards the portrayals of women in the deathless classics *All About Eve* (1950), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) as reflections of the breathtaking misogyny found in postwar writings such as *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947) by Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham, which maintains that first-wave feminism aimed for "the achievement of maleness by the female" (qtd. in Nadel 87). It is plausible to see this famous trifecta of films about Hollywood and Broadway as "reflect[ing] the historically specific conditions of a postwar America that marshals an array of powerful narratives to discipline women who wish to retain their prewar or wartime agency" (88). However, to view those movies in only these terms is not just to ignore the pleasure they undeniably give to millions but to find cultural import their sole meaning.

For example, in the "Moses Supposes" number in *Singin' in the Rain*, "the tempo accelerates a dozen times" (42) because that was "exactly what the assembly lines were doing in Detroit." Meanwhile, the befuddled elocution instructor in the same number, a comic foil who could have stepped out of the Marx Brothers' *Horse Feathers* (1932), represents professors teaching veterans going to college on the GI Bill, "men who had commanded planes in bombing raids over Berlin or led platoons through the jungles of Guadalcanal" (43). Of course, none of this can actually be found in a film set in a movie studio in the late 1920s, when the film takes place. Moreover, *Singin'* would probably still have been made had World War II and its aftermath never happened: the chief causes of the anxiety motivating Hollywood to make the cycle of self-reflexive, introspective films that includes *Singin'* and *Sunset* were the court case against film studios' monopoly of the industry and the national launch of television. These threats had been looming since the late 1930s and were put off for several years because of World War II. Thus, 1950s Hollywood was in crisis while the rest of the country was entering boom times and redirecting its leisure time from movie theaters to activities centered on home and family.

Nadel suspects another classic, *On the Waterfront* (1954), because its conflict isn't between management and a labor union but between a corrupt union on the New York docks and its oppressed workers.

Therefore, to Nadel, the drama, which features the contributions of Marlon Brando, Elia Kazan, and Budd

Schulberg, amounts to a "pervasive assault on organized labor" (99). Nadel spends much space on the sermon given by Father Barry (Karl Malden), a character based on Father John Corridan, the so-called waterfront priest, twisting it into a condemnation of unions for demanding a fair wage. In the film's context, however, the sermon is directed at the workers who remain "D and D" (97)—"deaf and dumb"—unwilling to speak out about the corruption on the docks. Film critics and scholars have long been divided about *Waterfront*'s message: is it Kazan and Schulberg's rationalization for their "naming names" (95) before the House Un-American Activities Committee? The film's many critics, including Leo Braudy, Peter Biskind, and Richard Schickel, agree that whatever motivated its creators, *Waterfront* is cinematically and dramatically powerful, the culmination in cinema of the work of the Group Theatre, the Actors Studio, and American neorealism. Its controversy contributes to its greatness. Turning *On the Waterfront*, as Nadel attempts to, into a tract against the labor movement and in favor of the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act and the right-to-work laws it made possible half a century later feels ahistorical and unfair, as if blaming Kazan's film for abuses of our own time.

The book's second half picks up somewhat, probably because the author moves to lesser-known films that he can more convincingly animate with his cultural interpellations. The delightful Danny Kaye vehicle, *The Court Jester* (1956), with its *Robin Hood*-like plot about a band of insurgents in Merrie Olde England that contrive to return an infant king to his rightful place on the throne, becomes a metaphor for the place of children at the center of 1950s culture. Nadel conveys the film's charm, inspiring a bit of admiration in the reader for his own critical imagination. He also can't avoid acknowledging Kaye's performative ingenuity.

Chapters on America's cinematic reconciliations with its defeated war enemies, Germany (*The Big Lift* [1950], Italy (*Roman Holiday* [1953]) and Japan (*The Teahouse of the August Moon* [1956] and *Sayonara* [1957]); on Hollywood's attempts at "dealing with white anxiety" (183) about "the prospect of integration" (*No Way Out* [1950] and *The Defiant Ones* [1958]); and on the status of the American

territory—but never state—Puerto Rico (*West Side Story* [1961]), in comparison to Communist Cuba, round out the book.

It's telling that the most convincing chapter is on *North by Northwest* (1959). With an undeniably canonical film by Alfred Hitchcock, the American director canonized by scholars of all orientations, Nadel engages in shot-by-shot analyses, explores the semiotics of the closeup, points out the compositions in the crop-dusting scene, and takes part in other cinematic examinations of the sorts absent everywhere else in the book. This newfound attention to form doesn't keep the author from elucidating a thesis about the flaws inherent in the UN Charter, which can be found in the film as more than a MacGuffin, Hitchcockian protestations notwithstanding. Thus, the *North by Northwest* chapter is the exception that proves this book's rule. While films as films are ignored in every other chapter of *Demographic Angst*, Hitchcock's aesthetics simply will not be denied. Ultimately, the study of *North by Northwest* has a fully realized sense as well as a persuasive power that no other section of the book begins to touch.

**Dennis Bingham**

**Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis**